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ABSTRACT

How much do 17-year olds know about U.S. history and literature? The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been gathering information about the educational attainment of American students in a variety of subject areas, but no study had focused solely on students' basic knowledge of American history and their familiarity with major authors, themes, and characters of Western literature. An assessment probe was designed to supply systematic information about the extent to which this knowledge is acquired by students in American schools. An initial draft of the assessment probe, developed by staff members of NAEP, was reviewed by almost 100 educators to ensure that the assessment topics did not diverge from current teaching practice. The final draft reflects the suggested changes. An assessment of the literacy of 17-year-olds included U.S. history and general literature because it was felt that literacy includes not only communication skills but also knowledge about the variety of topics that form the basis of dialogue and information sharing. The National Commission on Excellence in Education named history and literature among its new basics. The U.S. history topics are arranged by chronological periods: before 1763; 1763-1815; 1815-1877; 1877-1920; 1920-1945; and 1945-present. Care was taken to address topics relevant to political history, women's history, Black history, labor history, technology, geography, immigration, and foreign policy. Criteria for considering certain works of literature as fundamental to our culture are given for the following genres: (1) novels, short stories, and plays; (2) myths, epics, and Biblical characters and stories; (3) poetry; and (4) nonfiction. (GDC)

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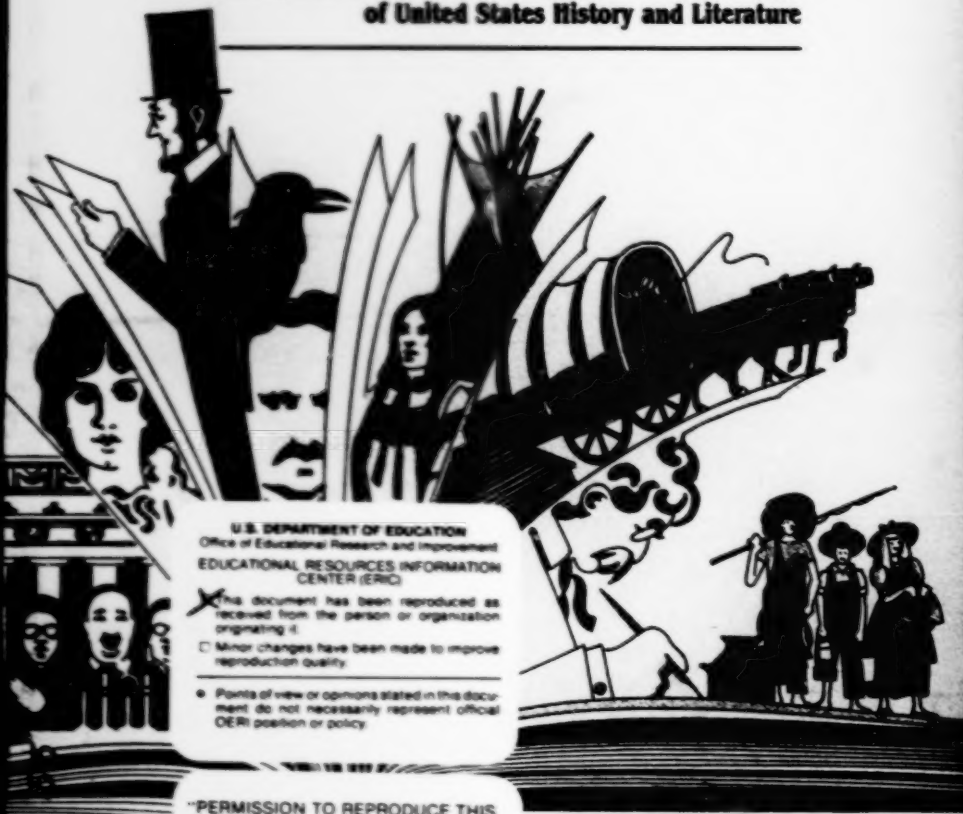
FOUNDATIONS OF LITERACY

A Description of the Assessment of a Basic Knowledge of United States History and Literature



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FOUNDATIONS OF LITERACY:

A Description of the Assessment of a Basic Knowledge of United States History and Literature

The National Assessment of Educational Progress
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The Foundations of Literacy Project is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities under a grant to the Educational Excellence Network, Columbia University. The Educational Excellence Network subcontracted the assessment of 17-year-old and 11th grade students' knowledge of history and literature to NAEP.

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INTRODUCTION

How many young Americans know which came first, the Declaration of Independence or the Emancipation Proclamation? The Vietnam War or the Second World War? How many can identify Huck Finn? The author of *Macbeth?* Emily Dickinson? How many can name or remember any poem that they have read? A novel? A play? How many read books? What books have they read?

Although a feeling exists that many students may lack basic knowledge of U.S. history and literature, we are currently unable to answer questions about the extent to which young Americans have been exposed to—and, much more important, have retained in their minds—the elementary content of these subjects. The baseline data simply do not exist for educators, policymakers, curriculum builders, scholars, parents, and voters to appraise the extent to which the next generation of Americans possesses the rudimentary knowledge that forms the foundations of literacy. Students cannot build the conceptual understandings necessary for reasoned thought and communication without knowing the basic facts that underlie these concepts.

The description of the fundamentals for understanding U.S. history and literature presented in this booklet was developed for a special probe to assess basic knowledge in U.S. history and literature. The assessment, to be conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the Spring of 1986, will be administered to nationally representative probability samples of both 17-year-olds and 11th-graders as part of The Foundations of Literacy project. The Educational Excellence Network is conducting the project in conjunction with NAEP, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

NAEP has been gathering information about the educational attainment of our nation's youth in a variety of subject areas for the past 16 years. Previous NAEP assessments of social studies, literature, and reading have included knowledge questions, but this is the first assessment probe focused solely on students' basic knowledge of American history and their familiarity with major authors, themes, and characters of Western literature. Although consultants and staff generally agreed that a more comprehensive assessment, including skills and conceptual understanding, was preferable, they acknowledged that there is a growing concern that a number of young Americans may lack rudimentary knowledge of U.S. history and of literature. This assessment probe was designed to supply systematic information about the extent to which this important knowledge is acquired by the young adults of tomorrow.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

This statement, therefore, serves as the foundation of an assessment developed to address the question: How much do our young people actually *know* about U.S. history and literature? To be responsive to the many points of view, interests, and priorities found in American education and to ensure that the questions fairly represent a broad consensus about the basic knowledge of history and literature that students can reasonably be expected to have acquired by the age of 17, NAEP has based the assessment on topics developed through a complex review process. In the spring of 1985, Network and NAEP staffs prepared the initial draft that reflected decisions made by a 10-member Advisory Committee of U.S. history and literature specialists and teachers. (See Appendix A, page 21.) The draft was then reviewed by almost 100 educators (Appendix B, page 22) to ensure that the assessment topics did not diverge substantially from current practice as perceived by teachers, curriculum specialists, and school administrators. This statement reflects the suggested changes and it has been reviewed by the Advisory Committee members to ensure that the assessment will be free of bias and consistent with the general expectations of educational achievement. All contributors and reviewers were chosen to reflect the perspectives of people in various sizes and types of communities, from many geographic regions and from a variety of racial/ethnic groups.

The present statement does not necessarily reflect the views of every individual who participated in the review process, but it does represent, as nearly as possible, the consensus obtained from the development and review groups.

BACKGROUND: WHY U.S. HISTORY AND LITERATURE?

Traditionally, educators have tended to define "literacy" as a set of reading and writing skills rather than a body of knowledge, shared references, and commonly understood facts that enable people to communicate with one another. In reality, being "literate" includes not only having the skills to communicate, but having some knowledge about the variety of topics that form the basis of dialogue and information-sharing, oral or written.

The same may be observed about analytical skills and the current concern to teach students to think. Although the ability to think logically, analyze situations, and solve problems is crucial, without basic knowledge, students simply are not able to think at all about a great many important subjects.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education recognized the importance of writing, reading, and computational skills, the need

for a technically, scientifically, and mathematically competent citizenry, and the teaching of higher-order thinking skills. However, of its five "New Basics," two are history and literature.

History and literature *are* basic. Yet, educators and policymakers alike have been wary of specifying the knowledge that students should possess in such domains as history and literature—domains in which cultural, political, and intellectual arguments sometimes rage. This description represents an attempt to begin such a process and to outline some fundamentals of a basic knowledge of U.S. history and literature.

PURPOSE

Good physicians never prescribe remedies without first diagnosing ailments. Of course, a patient's health cannot be confirmed by avoiding diagnosis. Until one is examined and a diagnosis is received, one isn't apt to get treated. In like manner, if we have no real idea what our children know about U.S. history and literature, we aren't likely to prescribe measures to see that they learn more, or that their knowledge gaps are filled in; or, should it turn out that students know quite a lot after all, that indeed we need not fret about this aspect of their education.

The purpose of the probe is to gather information about basic knowledge in U.S. history and literature in a fair, accurate, and replicable process and to make it available in an accessible, intelligible form to prospective users—a population that includes national, state, and local policymakers for education, teachers in the humanities, professional educators at every level, parents, citizens, and taxpayers. All prospective users can, of course, perform their own analyses and draw their own conclusions from the assessment, derive their own policy implications, and set forth their own recommendations.

We will not know with certainty how well history and literature are being taught, but we will assuredly learn more than anyone today knows about how well these subjects have been learned by 17-year-old Americans preparing to move from secondary schools into colleges, into the work force, and into adult citizenship. Although the policy implications of this knowledge may become matters of controversy, the results will be available to all for interpretation. We hope that the data gathered will be extensively analyzed, widely used, and frequently commented upon.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOKLET

Part I: The Fundamentals of U.S. History presents the background and purpose of the assessment in U.S. history as well as an outline of the topics, including examples of each. Also included are the specifications developed by the Advisory Committee for the distribution of assessment exercises among the topical areas.

Part II: The Fundamentals of Literature presents a brief discussion of what is meant by a fundamental knowledge of literature, identifies the genres, describes the criteria used for the selection of literary works and authors included in the assessment, and specifies the distribution of exercises among the various genres.

> *[American History] is a story of promise and achievement, as well as the irony and tragedy of only partially fulfilled ideals. It is a story the events of which are connected in patterns of influence and consequence, not recounted in isolation from one another.* (***America, A Narrative History,*** George Brown Tindall)

NAEP consultants, reviewers, and staff involved with The Foundations of Literacy project basically agree with the statement above. Ideally, an assessment of students' knowledge and understanding of U.S. history would not focus on simple recognition of the facts of our history—the documents, events and personages that have molded the nation—but would explore the extent to which students can and do use their knowledge of the discrete elements of our history to formulate ideas and concepts, to recognize "patterns of influence and consequence," and to establish for themselves a sense of the connectedness of things.

However, there is a growing concern that students may lack the elementary knowledge of U.S. history necessary to formulate concepts, establish relationships, and discern patterns. Further, there is no national study based on a sample of students representing a broad range of ability levels. An investigation is needed to inform educators and the public about whether students have this basic factual knowledge.

Given that high school students are the products of the nation's educational system and are on the threshold of assuming the responsibilities of adult citizenship, it is important to establish how well they have learned the basics of U.S. history. The purpose of the assessment is therefore to establish the baseline upon which future assessments might be built. The results will provide information about what students have learned, what is reasonable to expect them to know, and what steps can be taken to better prepare the students of tomorrow.

ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE TOPICS

Although care was taken to address topics relevant to political history, women's history, Black history, labor history, technology, geography, immigration, and foreign policy, the assessment topics are presented chronologically for the convenience of ordering the material. There is no intent to provide a synopsis of the tables of contents across U.S. history textbooks.

I. Exploration and Colonization: up to 1763

A. Exploration

- Factors contributing to exploration (e.g., desire for wealth, technological advances)
- Major countries and explorers involved (e.g., Spain, France, England)

B. Colonization

- Factors contributing to colonization (e.g., religious, economic, and social issues)
- The first colonies (e.g., governments based on English models, leaders of original colonies, and relations with Native American cultures)
- Aspects of colonial life (e.g., diversity of religious and ethnic groups, origins of slavery, types of economy, and immigration)

II. The Revolutionary War and the New Republic: 1763-1815

A. The Revolutionary War

- Factors contributing to the Revolutionary War (e.g., English exploitation of the colonies and emergence of an American society)
- Documents (e.g., Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and *Common Sense*)
- Importance of American leadership (e.g., George Washington, Thomas Paine, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin)
- Events and aspects of the war (e.g., Bunker Hill, Saratoga, foreign alliances)

B. Establishing the New Nation

- The Constitution (e.g., major compromises, structure, and steps leading to ratification)
- Forming the new government (e.g., political parties, leaders)
- Expansion (e.g., migration, the Louisiana Purchase, trade with Europe, difficulties maintaining neutrality, and the War of 1812)

III. Nationhood, Sectionalism, and the Civil War: 1815-1877

A. Economic and social change (e.g., growth of cities, industrialization, transportation)

B. Jacksonian Democracy (e.g., political parties, expanding the franchise, treatment of Native Americans)

C. Expansion of Slavery (e.g., Missouri Compromise, plantation economy, and abolitionists)

D. The Civil War

- Federal powers versus states' rights (e.g., nullification)
- Factors leading up to the Civil War (e.g., slavery, economic differences between North and South, and secession versus preservation of the Union)
- Abraham Lincoln (e.g., Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg Address)
- Effects of the Civil War (e.g., growth of North; destruction of South; Reconstruction; passage of Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—abolition of slavery, due process and equal protection, and the right to vote)

IV. Territorial Expansion, the Rise of Modern America, and World War I: 1877-1920

A. Territorial Expansion

- Western expansion (e.g., territories involved, improved transportation, farm protests, Indian Wars, and the reservation system)
- The Spanish-American War (e.g., territorial acquisitions, United States becomes world power)

B. The Rise of Modern America

- Big business (e.g., leaders, new production techniques, and monopolies)
- Labor unions (e.g., working conditions, American Federation of Labor, problems in organizing unions)
- Progressive Era and reform legislation (e.g., populism, Theodore Roosevelt, muckraking, "trust busting," and conservation
- Immigration (e.g., shift in patterns; efforts to restrict—National Origins Act)
- Segregation and efforts at equality for minorities (e.g., *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* —separate but equal, Jim Crow laws, NAACP)

C. The First World War

- Reasons for United States' entry (e.g., rights of neutrality and submarine warfare)

- Characteristics of the war (e.g., countries involved; leaders—Woodrow Wilson)
- Events and effects (e.g., Treaty of Versailles, League of Nations, substantial American contribution, isolationist mood after war)

D. Women's Vote—Nineteenth Amendment (e.g., early advocates—Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Seneca Falls)

V. The Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II: 1920-1945

A. The 1920s (e.g., temperance movement and prohibition, inventions, Scopes trial)

B. Causes and characteristics of the Great Depression (e.g., stock market crash, collapse of economy, Dust Bowl)

C. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (e.g., changes in role of government, gains for labor, agricultural price supports, Social Security)

D. The Second World War

- Factors leading up to United States' involvement in the war (e.g., rise of totalitarianism, United States initially neutral, enters war with Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor)
- Characteristics of the war (e.g., global nature with European and Pacific theaters; the Holocaust; leaders—Churchill, Stalin, Hitler, and Roosevelt; effect of war effort on roles of women and minorities; Japanese relocation camps; relationships with Allies—Yalta)
- End of the Second World War (e.g., Roosevelt dies and is succeeded by Truman; United States uses atomic bomb to end war with Japan)
- The United Nations (e.g., purpose)

VI. Post-World War II: 1945 to Present

A. The Cold War (e.g., containment of communism, beginnings of arms race, Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, NATO, fear of communism leading to McCarthyism, Communist expansion in Europe)

B. Korean Conflict (e.g., UN forces, MacArthur versus Truman)

C. Post-war prosperity (e.g., demand for consumer goods; the baby

boom; the growth of the suburbs; inventions and discoveries; Sputnik begins space race)

D. The 1960s
- President Kennedy and the New Frontier (e.g., space program, Cuban missile crisis, Peace Corps, assassination)
- President Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society (e.g., increased social legislation and government spending)
- Civil Rights Movement (e.g., *Brown* v. *Board of Education* and beyond, Martin Luther King, civil rights legislation)
- Vietnam (e.g., growing unpopularity of war, protest movement)

E. The 1970s
- Opening to China
- United States' withdrawal from Vietnam
- Watergate, resignation of President Nixon and succession by President Ford
- Women's Rights Movement (e.g., Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and ERA)
- Energy crisis, human rights

Distribution of Assessment Exercises

The emphasis given to each time period is noted below.

Time Period	*Distribution of Items*
I. Exploration and Colonization: to 1763	10%
II. The Revolutionary War and the New Republic: 1763-1815	17
III. Nationhood, Sectionalism, and the Civil War: 1815-1877	18
IV. Territorial Expansion, the Rise of Modern America, and World War I: 1877-1920	20
V. The Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II: 1920-1945	20
VI. Post-World War II: 1945 to Present	15

A fundamental knowledge of literature can be compared to a nucleus with many rings around it. This nucleus, or core knowledge, forms the basis of our communication with one another, and the rings represent those literary works and genres of special interest to individuals. There is no absolute definition of this core. But the following description of a fundamental knowledge of literature is meant to reflect, not to dictate, the "core" or the literary culture that most people might be expected to have in common at this time.

A common literary culture is based on literature that is widely recognized by literate people. This literature, by virtue of being frequently referenced, has survived the passage of time and therefore is used as a basis for further communication with one another. Because the common literary culture is intergenerational, it ensures the continuity of knowledge. Although much of the literature shared by the last generation is also shared with this generation, the universality of some works has diminished as other works have gained in prominence. This culture is not static. Some new works widely read today will survive as part of the common culture of future generations. We anticipate that a future common culture will include more works by women and minorities. Therefore, we do not intend that our content limit the possibilities for the future, but rather that it describe the current status.

It is therefore important that students be able to recognize the literature that is part of our common culture. They should be familiar with characters who have become symbols of our humanity, with authors and works that are representative of major genres, themes, and movements, and with familiar quotations from poems, plays, speeches, and documents.

These characters, authors, works, themes, and quotations have been drawn from a wide variety of literature, including classical as well as modern works, world literature in addition to American and English literature, and children's classics. This variety is meant to indicate the range and depth of our cultural experience as expressed in our literary tradition, although no list can be totally comprehensive.

Before describing the areas considered to be basic to a knowledge of literature, NAEP and the wide variety of consultants involved emphasize the following:

- The areas and illustrative topics are not meant to prescribe a high school reading list. Some knowledge of literature can and should be learned before high school or outside of school.
- It is not expected that everyone will have an extensive and detailed knowledge of all areas, but that students will be familiar with some of the representative works and writers in each area and with their significance.

- Cultural literacy is not to be equated with mere recognition of names of authors and titles—a deeper level of knowledge depends upon a thoughtful understanding of the significance of the works.

The following questions formed the criteria for describing literature considered fundamental to our culture:

- What is basic for understanding and interpreting other literature?
- What helps us define ourselves and our culture?
- What can enlarge our capacity to imagine what is outside our own experiences?
- What helps us to understand both the diversity and similarity of the human experience?
- What can change our lives because of profound insights into the meaning of human experience?
- What is representative of major genres and themes?

The specific criteria for particular areas and a general description and illustrative examples are presented below. The description of each area is not meant to be specific but to indicate the diversity within each area.

GENRES AND SELECTION CRITERIA

I. Novels, Short Stories, and Plays

These works and their authors are significant because of universal characters, plots, and themes. This universality arises when a work portrays an experience or a characteristic common to humanity and so helps us to understand ourselves and to develop our personal values.

A. Novels

The emphasis is on American authors and their works (Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Cather's *My Ántonia*). Major English and foreign (translated) works are also included (*Robinson Crusoe, 1984, Don Quixote*). Knowledge and understanding of characters, plots, and themes are essential.

B. Short Stories

Most of the stories are by American authors (Edgar Allan Poe,

O. Henry, Shirley Jackson). A knowledge of characters (Walter Mitty) and plots ("Rip Van Winkle") will be assessed.

C. Plays

The emphasis is equally divided between Shakespearean plays (*Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet*) and classical and modern plays (*Oedipus Rex, Our Town, A Raisin in the Sun*). Knowledge of characters, plots, and familiar passages will be assessed as well as an understanding of themes.

II. Myths, Epics, and Biblical Characters and Stories

Knowledge of these is necessary in order to understand other literature in our culture because of the frequency of allusions and references to these texts. This knowledge constitutes a cultural shorthand that enables students to recognize certain universal characters, symbols, and themes. With this knowledge, students may recognize the similarities of human experience, past and present.

A. Myths, Heroes, and Legends

Classical Greek and Roman mythology (Midas, Venus, Zeus) is the major emphasis in this area. Also included are the Arthurian legend (Merlin), fairy tales (Cinderella), folk heroes (Robin Hood), and fables ("The Tortoise and the Hare").

B. Epics

Included are the earliest epics (*The Odyssey*) and those patterned after them (*Paradise Lost*).

C. Biblical Characters and Stories

Major biblical figures (Moses, Judas), events (the Flood), and parables (the Prodigal Son) are the core of this area.

III. Poetry

These poets and works are significant because of themes, allusions, and imagery that enable us to understand the meaning of our human experience, that help alter our sensibilities, and that enlarge our imagination. Some of these works are also frequently quoted and thus have become a vehicle for our communication with others.

Included are mostly American poets and their poems (Dickinson, Whitman, Hughes) as well as some English poets (Shelley, Blake). Some familiar passages (from Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening") are also cited.

IV. Nonfiction

Some of these works and their authors are frequently referred to because they have come to embody the values of our culture. Others are worthy of study because of their success in the communication of ideas by the use of effective rhetoric.

A variety of American nonfiction has been included: speeches (King's "I Have a Dream"), historical documents (Declaration of Independence) and biographies (Thoreau's *Walden*).

Distribution of Assessment Exercises

The emphases given to the genres are noted below.

Literary Area	*Distribution of Items*
Novels, Short Stories, and Plays	50%
Myths, Epics, and Biblical Characters and Stories	30
Poems	10
Nonfiction	10

APPENDIX A

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